



Cross-Border Terrorism and the India-Pakistan Security Dilemma

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Abstract

This article examines the persistent challenge of cross-border terrorism between India and Pakistan within the framework of the security dilemma in international relations. It argues that the asymmetric use of non-state actors by Pakistan, under the shield of nuclear deterrence, has significantly exacerbated bilateral tensions and impeded peaceful conflict resolution. Drawing on historical events, such as the Kargil War (1999), the Mumbai attacks (2008), and the Pulwama incident (2019), the paper highlights how terrorism has blurred the lines between war and peace, creating a volatile security environment. The study further analyzes how both countries' military doctrines and political narratives have reinforced strategic mistrust. It also investigates the role of international actors and institutions including the United States, China, the United Nations, and the Financial Action Task Force in shaping the trajectory of the conflict. The article concludes by proposing multi-layered policy solutions focused on deterrence stability, counter-terrorism cooperation, economic interdependence, and people-to-people engagement as pathways toward sustainable peace in South Asia.

Keywords: Cross-border terrorism, India-Pakistan relations, security dilemma, non-state actors, nuclear deterrence.

This paper tries to explore the persistent issue of cross-border terrorism between India and Pakistan. It also talks about the security dilemma of the states. It explores how asymmetric threats, particularly state-sponsored terrorism and insurgency, have fuelled mutual suspicion between the two states. It has hardened the national security doctrines, and has led to recurrent military crises. Taking the historical trajectory analysis and key case studies such as the Kargil War, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, and the 2019 Pulwama incident into account, the paper attempts to examine how non-state actors complicate the security environment. The effort is to address the international dimensions of the conflict, including nuclear deterrence, the role of global powers, and economic pressures. It tries to analyse the impact of political narratives, military posturing, and diplomatic stagnation, the paper argues that resolving the India-Pakistan security dilemma requires more than deterrence. It demands a rethinking of security frameworks, trust-building, and international engagement. The article concludes with policy recommendations for a more sustainable and cooperative security architecture in South Asia.

Introduction

India and Pakistan, two nuclear-armed neighbours born from the violent Partition of 1947, have endured a tumultuous relationship marked by wars, skirmishes, and persistent mistrust. Among the most destabilizing features of this relationship is the enduring threat of cross-border terrorism, which continues to shape strategic decisions, instigate public hostility, and erode opportunities for peaceful engagement. This phenomenon, wherein militant groups based in or supported by Pakistan infiltrate Indian territory to conduct acts of violence, has triggered some of the gravest military and diplomatic crises in the subcontinent. In international relations, such interactions are often examined through the lens of the security dilemma a concept which suggests that measures taken by one state to enhance its security often provoke countermeasures by another, leading to a spiral of tension even when neither party desires conflict (Jervis, 1978). In the context of India and Pakistan,

this dilemma is compounded by the presence of non-state actors, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, whose activities blur the line between war and peace, state and non-state violence, and provoke state responses with significant escalatory potential. The attempt here is to understand how cross-border terrorism contributes to the India-Pakistan security dilemma. It will examine the evolution of threats through terrorism, analyse key incidents, assess military and diplomatic responses, and explore how international pressures have shaped the behaviour of both the states. In doing so, the article highlights the paradox at the heart of South Asia's most enduring conflict: that in seeking security, both India and Pakistan may be perpetuating their own insecurity.

Historical Context

To comprehend the current dynamics of cross-border terrorism and the security dilemma between India and Pakistan, it is essential to trace the historical roots of their adversarial relationship. The root of hostility can be traced back in 1947, and the evolution of this rivalry has been shaped by multiple wars, territorial disputes, ideological divergences, and the emergence of insurgent and terrorist actors. The Partition of British India in 1947 led to the creation of the sovereign states of India and Pakistan, accompanied by one of the bloodiest episodes of ethnic and communal violence in modern history (Talbot & Singh, 2009). The division was not merely territorial. It created ideological differences too, India chose a secular, democratic path, while Pakistan defined itself as a homeland for Muslims.

The most enduring legacy of Partition is the dispute over Jammu and Kashmir, which was a princely state with a Muslim majority but a Hindu ruler, who chose to accede to India during the 1947-48 conflict. This led to the First India-Pakistan War. It ended with a United Nations's mediated ceasefire and the de facto division of Kashmir into Indian, and Pakistani, administered zones. This territorial dispute has been the focal point of bilateral tensions ever since (Schofield, 2003). India and Pakistan have fought three major wars (1947-48, 1965, 1971) and one limited war (Kargil, 1999). In 1947-48 war was sparked by tribal invasion and Pakistan's support for insurgents in Kashmir. In 1965, war initiated by Pakistan's Operation Gibraltar, which aimed to incite an uprising in Indian-administered Kashmir. In 1971, war resulted in Pakistan's defeat and the creation of Bangladesh, the war significantly altered regional power dynamics. Kargil War (1999) was significant. Pakistani soldiers and militants infiltrated Indian territory in the Kargil sector, leading to intense fighting at high altitudes. India successfully repulsed the incursion, and international pressure, particularly from the U.S. It forced Pakistan to withdraw. The Kargil conflict was especially notable because it occurred after both nations had conducted nuclear tests in 1998, raising fears of escalation into nuclear war (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010). The armed insurgency in Indian-administered Kashmir began in 1989. It was catalysed by domestic political discontent, electoral manipulation, and growing Islamist sentiment. While initially local in character, the insurgency was soon infiltrated and escalated by Pakistan-based groups, notably Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). These groups received training, funding, and logistical support from elements within Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) (Riedel, 2008). This marked a significant shift in the conflict, from a largely political dispute to a protracted hybrid war, involving cross-border infiltration, terrorism, and propaganda. Pakistan officially denies involvement, framing such groups as independent actors or freedom fighters, while India views their activities as state-sponsored terrorism.

The nuclear tests by India and Pakistan in May 1998 were driven by mutual distrust and regional power ambitions. While these tests introduced a degree of deterrence stability, they also emboldened Pakistan to continue using sub-conventional tactics, including supporting insurgent groups, under the umbrella of nuclear deterrence, a concept referred to as the stability-instability paradox (Sagan, 2001). This paradox suggests that while the risk of full-scales wars reduced due to nuclear deterrence, it creates space for low-intensity conflict and terrorist activity. Since 1990s onward, Pakistan's reliance on non-state actors intensified. Organizations like LeT and JeM evolved into proxy forces, capable of striking high-value targets in India while providing Islamabad plausible deniability. Incidents such as the 1993 Mumbai bombings, the 2001 Indian Parliament attack, and the 2008 Mumbai attacks demonstrated the reach and lethality of these groups. The 2001 Parliament attack brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war, prompting a massive military mobilization (Operation Parakram). Similarly, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, executed by LeT operatives, provoked international outrage and further entrenched India's perception of Pakistan as a terror sponsor (Fair, 2014). Cross-border terrorism, especially in the context of India and Pakistan, is characterized by the infiltration of armed militants from Pakistani territory into India, often with the intention to destabilize the region, incite violence, or provoke military escalation. While Pakistan officially denies any role in sponsoring terrorism, a vast body of evidence, intelligence reports, and global assessments implicate Pakistani state elements especially the Inter-Services

Intelligence (ISI) in either directly supporting or turning a blind eye to the operations of terror outfits (Tellis, 2008).

Elements of cross border terrorism

This section explores the infrastructure, major organizations, and critical case studies that define the landscape of cross-border terrorism in South Asia. Over the past three decades, a sophisticated network of terrorist infrastructure has emerged in Pakistan, particularly in regions like Punjab province, Pakistan-administered Kashmir, and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The infrastructure includes:

- Terrorist training camps, operated or facilitated by groups such as LeT and JeM.
- Religious seminaries (madrasas) that serve as recruitment and radicalization hubs.
- Logistical support networks, often backed by state agencies, enabling cross-border movement.
- Financial channels, including charities, hawala networks, and overseas donations.

These facilities operate with varying degrees of state complicity, and are often protected under the guise of religious organizations or “welfare groups” (Abbas, 2005). Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), founded in the 1990s, has been one of the most active and lethal groups involved in attacks on Indian soil. While it began as a jihadist organization with pan-Islamist objectives, it soon focused on the Kashmir issue and broader anti-India operations. Its front organization, Jamaat-ud-Dawa, continues to operate openly in Pakistan under the pretext of humanitarian work. Another one, Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), emerging from the splintering of militant factions in the early 2000s, JeM has orchestrated several high-profile attacks, including the 2001 Indian Parliament attack and the 2019 Pulwama bombing. It maintains strong ties with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda and is believed to have close connections with the ISI. Hizbul Mujahideen, another group, primarily an indigenous Kashmiri group, Hizbul Mujahideen receives ideological and logistical support from Pakistan. It was once the most dominant militant group in Indian-administered Kashmir but has declined in influence with the rise of foreign-backed groups.

Some key cases

2001 Indian Parliament Attack: On December 13, 2001, five armed terrorists stormed the Indian Parliament, killing nine people. Though the attackers were killed before reaching the chambers, the attack was a direct assault on Indian sovereignty. The Indian government accused JeM and LeT of orchestrating the attack, with support from Pakistan-based handlers (Fair, 2014). This incident led to a massive military standoff, “Operation Parakram”, bringing both countries to the brink of full-scale war.

2008 Mumbai Attacks: The most devastating act of cross-border terrorism, the 26/11 attacks involved ten LeT-trained gunmen who launched coordinated assaults across Mumbai, killing over 170 people and injuring hundreds. The attacks were meticulously planned in Pakistan and included the use of satellite phones, GPS devices, and handlers who guided the terrorists in real-time (Riedel, 2008). Indian and international intelligence agencies identified Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi and Hafiz Saeed as key figures behind the operation.

2016 Uri Attack: On September 18, 2016, four terrorists attacked an Indian Army base near the town of Uri in Jammu and Kashmir, killing 19 soldiers. India attributed the attack to Pakistan-based JeM operatives. In response, India launched surgical strikes across the Line of Control (LoC), targeting terror launchpads—a notable shift from strategic restraint to proactive military retaliation (Pant & Joshi, 2016).

2019 Pulwama Attack: On February 14, 2019, a suicide bomber rammed an explosives-laden vehicle into a convoy of Indian paramilitary forces, killing 40 personnel. The attack was claimed by JeM and is widely regarded as the most deadly terrorist incident in Kashmir. It triggered the Balakot airstrikes, in which India targeted a JeM training camp in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Pakistan responded with aerial engagement, leading to the capture and eventual return of Indian Air Force pilot Abhinandan Varthaman (Ganguly & Kapur, 2020).

However, Pakistan has consistently denied involvement in these incidents, asserting that the attackers were either home-grown militants or rogue elements. However, global pressure particularly from the Financial

Action Task Force (FATF) has led to symbolic crackdowns on terror groups. Yet these actions are often viewed as cosmetic, with arrested individuals later released or political figures affiliated with banned groups contesting elections (Haqqani, 2018). International responses have ranged from condemnations to strategic restraint, particularly by the United States, which has historically viewed Pakistan as a key partner in the war on terror but has also criticized its dual policy of harbouring terrorists while cooperating against them.

The Security Dilemma

The security dilemma, a foundational concept in international relations, explains how actions taken by one state to enhance its own security often appear threatening to others, prompting countermeasures and creating a cycle of mutual suspicion (Jervis, 1978). In the context of India and Pakistan, the dilemma is intensified by asymmetrical threats namely, Pakistan's use of non-state actors under a nuclear umbrella, and India's evolving military and diplomatic responses. The result is a dangerous and destabilizing pattern of action and reaction, escalating tensions even when neither side may seek open conflict. India's security establishment views cross-border terrorism as an extension of Pakistan's state policy, an instrument of asymmetric warfare. This perception has shaped India's military and diplomatic strategies, resulting in both strategic restraint and limited retaliation. For much of the post-1990s period, India responded to provocations with measured restraint, fearing that full-scale retaliation might escalate into nuclear war. However, after the Kargil War and especially post-2008, India began shifting toward a more assertive posture, culminating in the 2016 surgical strikes and the 2019 Balakot airstrikes (Pant & Joshi, 2016). This signalled a move from passive deterrence to active response strategies, challenging Pakistan's assumption of India's restraint.

Pakistan's military doctrine is driven by the perception of an existential threat from a larger, conventionally superior India. Unable to match India in terms of conventional military power, Pakistan has employed a "bleed India with a thousand cuts" strategy, using proxies in Kashmir and elsewhere to keep India militarily and politically off balance (Fair, 2014). This tactic is justified internally through a mix of religious-nationalist ideology and strategic necessity. Islamabad's strategic calculations are also shaped by its nuclear posture, which it considers a shield that deters large-scale Indian retaliation. This creates a stability-instability paradox: while nuclear weapons deter full-scale war, they embolden lower-level conflicts, including cross-border terrorism (Sagan, 2001). The India-Pakistan security dilemma manifests vividly in their military doctrines: India's Cold Start Doctrine (CSD), a limited war strategy designed to launch quick, punitive strikes without crossing Pakistan's nuclear thresholds. Although never officially adopted, CSD has been interpreted by Pakistan as a real threat, prompting it to develop tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) (Ladwig, 2008). Pakistan's Nasr Missile System: Developed specifically to counter India's conventional superiority and CSD, Nasr is a short-range tactical nuclear weapon, indicating Pakistan's lowered nuclear threshold.

These doctrines demonstrate how one side's attempt to bolster deterrence is seen as offensive by the other, perpetuating a reciprocal escalation of capabilities and doctrines. The presence of nuclear weapons, combined with low-level terrorism, creates a highly volatile environment in which crisis escalation can occur rapidly. The 2001–2002 military standoff, the Kargil War, and the post-Pulwama crisis are all examples of how non-state actors can provoke state-level confrontations. Even limited conventional responses carry a risk of miscalculation. A terrorist attack perhaps with ambiguous origin or support could draw a disproportionate response, especially under domestic political pressure, leading to a full-blown crisis (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010). The security dilemma is not only military; it is psychological and political. National identity, historical narratives, and political incentives contribute to entrenched hostility. In India, public opinion has grown increasingly intolerant of perceived Pakistani aggression, pressuring political leaders to respond forcefully. In Pakistan, the military's dominant role in policymaking and its reliance on the Indian threat for institutional legitimacy make conflict narratives persistent (Haqqani, 2018). This dynamic creates a feedback loop where even confidence-building measures are viewed with suspicion or sabotaged by rogue actors.

The India-Pakistan conflict, especially the component of cross-border terrorism, has significant international ramifications. It affects regional stability in South Asia, global counter-terrorism efforts, and the broader international order concerning nuclear deterrence and non-state actors. As a result, major powers and international institutions have become important stakeholders in managing tensions and mediating crises between the two nuclear-armed neighbours. The United States has historically played a dual role in the subcontinent. During the Cold War, it viewed Pakistan as a strategic ally against Soviet expansion, providing military and economic assistance. However, after the Cold War and particularly following the 9/11 attacks, U.S. priorities shifted toward combating Islamist terrorism, bringing greater scrutiny to Pakistan's role as both a

partner and a sponsor of extremist networks. Pakistan became a key U.S. ally in the Global War on Terror, receiving billions in aid. Yet, revelations about safe havens for Taliban and Al-Qaeda elements in Pakistan, culminating in Osama bin Laden's death in Abbottabad in 2011, severely damaged trust. The U.S. has periodically exerted pressure on Pakistan to curb support for terrorist groups. Notably, after the Mumbai attacks, it worked closely with India in sharing intelligence and pushing for Pakistani accountability (Riedel, 2008). In recent years, Washington's growing strategic partnership with India, particularly through defense and economic agreements, has altered regional dynamics. This shift is perceived by Pakistan as tilting the balance of power in India's favor (Tellis, 2016). China also plays a complex role in the India-Pakistan equation. While it maintains diplomatic ties with both countries, it is Pakistan's closest strategic ally and largest defense partner. Beijing's support is driven by several interests. Pakistan serves as a counterweight to India's regional ambitions. A flagship project under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), CPEC passes through Gilgit-Baltistan, a disputed region claimed by India. This has led to tensions between India and China. China has provided Pakistan with weapons, nuclear technology, and diplomatic cover, often shielding it from international sanctions, especially in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Russia, historically aligned with India during the Cold War, has maintained a strategic partnership with India, including defense, nuclear energy, and space cooperation. However, in recent years, it has sought to broaden its outreach to Pakistan, primarily in the context of counter-terrorism and regional stability in Afghanistan. Moscow's engagement with Islamabad includes joint military drills, arms sales, and coordination in multilateral forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). While not as influential as the U.S. or China, Russia's role is growing in regional diplomacy (Pant & Raghavan, 2019).

The UN has historically played a limited and largely symbolic role in the India-Pakistan conflict. The UN Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) monitors the ceasefire line, but its mandate is considered obsolete by India, which sees Kashmir as an internal matter post-1972 Simla Agreement. Pakistan continues to seek internationalization of the dispute via the UN. Financial Action Task Force (FATF) perhaps have been the most impactful institutional mechanism, which places Pakistan on its "grey list" due to its failure to curb terror financing. International pressure through FATF has led to partial crackdowns on groups like LeT and JeM, though critics argue these are often superficial and reversible (Haqqani, 2018). India has used legal avenues such as the ICJ, notably in the Kulbhushan Jadhav case, to highlight issues of terrorism, human rights, and illegal detention. Though the ICJ's decisions are binding, enforcement relies on state cooperation, limiting their practical impact. The post-2001 situation in Afghanistan has had spillover effects on India-Pakistan dynamics. Both countries competed for influence in Kabul, and Pakistan's alleged support for the Taliban has contributed to regional instability. India invested in Afghan infrastructure and security training, while Pakistan viewed India's presence in Afghanistan as a strategic encirclement. The Taliban's return to power in 2021, backed in part by Pakistani influence, has raised concerns about a resurgence of regional jihadist networks that could target Indian interests, particularly in Kashmir (Rashid, 2021).

Policy Responses and Bilateral Initiatives

Efforts to manage the India-Pakistan security dilemma and counter cross-border terrorism have taken multiple forms military, diplomatic, legal, and economic. However, the success and sustainability of these measures have been inconsistent, frequently undermined by terrorist provocations, mutual mistrust, and shifting political dynamics in both countries. This section analyses major policy responses and initiatives designed to mitigate conflict, build confidence, and address the core security concerns between India and Pakistan. Historically, India responded to cross-border terrorism with strategic restraint, emphasizing international diplomacy and avoiding escalation. However, post-Uri and Pulwama, India adopted a more proactive posture. In 2016 Surgical Strikes - Cross-LoC raids targeting terror camps in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir were done. In 2019 Balakot Aerial bombardment of a JeM facility deep in Pakistani territory were done. These actions marked a shift toward limited offensive measures intended to signal resolve without triggering full-scale war (Pant & Joshi, 2016).

India has sought to internationalize Pakistan's support for terrorism, particularly after major attacks. This includes - opposing Pakistan at multilateral forums like SAARC and UNGA, Lobbying for global designations of terror groups and leaders, such as Masood Azhar being declared a UN-designated terrorist in 2019. Engaging with international institutions like FATF to pressure Pakistan on terror financing. In August 2019, India revoked Article 370 of its Constitution, ending Jammu and Kashmir's special status. The government claimed this would integrate the region fully and weaken separatist narratives. Pakistan responded with diplomatic downgrades and heightened rhetoric, further straining ties (Ganguly & Iyer, 2019).

Pakistan's response has been of consistently denying direct involvement in cross-border terrorism, framing incidents as indigenous Kashmiri resistance or false flag operations by India. This strategy of plausible deniability is a central pillar of Pakistan's asymmetric approach. Facing international pressure, Pakistan has at times taken action against certain terror outfits, including arrests and asset seizures. However, these actions are often seen as symbolic or temporary, with released operatives resuming activities under new organizational names (Haqqani, 2018). Pakistan has attempted to internationalize the Kashmir issue, presenting dossiers on alleged Indian human rights violations and sponsoring resolutions in OIC and UNHRC. These efforts have had limited traction, with most global actors urging bilateral resolution. Despite persistent hostility, India and Pakistan have periodically engaged in CBMs aimed at de-escalation. Initiated in 1998, this framework covered eight areas- peace and security, Kashmir, Siachen, Sir Creek, trade, people-to-people contact, terrorism, and cultural exchanges. Though suspended after 26/11, it remains a template for future engagement (Chari, 2010). Confidence-building in Kashmir has included - Cross-LoC bus services between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad. Trade routes across the LoC, now suspended but once hailed as significant. These initiatives helped humanize the conflict and foster limited economic cooperation, though frequent shutdowns and security concerns have hindered long-term success.

Several accords have aimed to reduce accidental escalation – in 1999 Lahore Declaration, a pledge to reduce nuclear risks. In 2003 Ceasefire Agreement which brought temporary peace along the LoC, though later violated frequently. In 2021 Ceasefire Reaffirmation, a surprise joint agreement to honor the 2003 ceasefire. Since then, border incidents have markedly declined (Joshi, 2021). Track II dialogues involving retired officials, scholars, journalists, and activists have played a critical role in keeping communication channels open. Forums like the Neemrana Dialogue and Delhi-Lahore process allowed both sides to exchange ideas informally, building trust outside the formal diplomatic circuit (Khan, 2013). Civil society initiatives including art exchanges, academic collaborations, and peace campaigns have also challenged hostile narratives, particularly among the youth and urban middle classes. Despite promising initiatives, sustained peace has been elusive. Key barriers include - Terrorist attacks often sabotage diplomatic breakthroughs (e.g., Pathankot, Pulwama). Hardline rhetoric is politically expedient in both countries, especially during elections. India remains skeptical of Pakistan's civilian leadership due to the dominance of the military and ISI. The lack of progress on the core issue of Kashmir continues to obstruct deeper engagement.

Despite the protracted hostility, cyclical crises, and the persistent threat of cross-border terrorism, there remain credible avenues for conflict resolution between India and Pakistan. These pathways if pursued with political will, public support, and international cooperation can gradually reduce tensions, mitigate the security dilemma, and create conditions for sustainable peace. This section explores possible strategies for breaking the deadlock. The lack of transparency in nuclear and conventional doctrines has contributed to mutual misperception and escalatory risk. A stable deterrent relationship requires - Clear articulation of red lines and thresholds can reduce ambiguity and miscalculation. While India maintains a No First Use (NFU) nuclear policy, Pakistan's ambiguous threshold has created strategic instability. Strengthening hotlines between military and political leadership can de-escalate confrontations quickly, as seen during the Balakot-Pulwama crisis when both countries engaged diplomatically to avoid war (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010). Though difficult, a framework for arms restraint especially concerning tactical nuclear weapons can build mutual confidence over time. Terrorism remains the most serious barrier to conflict resolution. A durable peace must include institutional mechanisms for counter-terrorism cooperation, which could include - Initiated in 2006 but quickly abandoned, JATM can be revived with robust verification protocols. Neutral actors such as the United Nations, Interpol, or trusted countries like Norway or Switzerland could assist in tracking and verifying terror networks to ensure transparency. Even limited intelligence cooperation on transnational threats like ISIS, drug trafficking, or cyber terrorism could create trust-building spillovers. However, such cooperation is only possible if Pakistan decisively severs its support to groups like LeT, JeM, and the Haqqani Network, and if India offers measured reciprocity. The Kashmir conflict remains the core strategic, emotional, and political flashpoint. A lasting peace must involve-

rather than grand solutions, incremental agreements on demilitarization, autonomy, or joint management could be explored, as proposed in past frameworks like the Musharraf-Manmohan 4-Point Formula (2006):

- Softening borders.
- Self-governance for both regions.
- Joint mechanisms.
- Gradual demilitarization.

This approach recognizes status quo realities while allowing space for compromise (Sinha, 2007). Peace efforts must include genuine engagement with Kashmiri political, civil society, and youth groups. Inclusive dialogue will enhance legitimacy and reduce radicalization. A mutually agreed reduction of troops, ending arbitrary detentions, and restoring communications and civil liberties can build goodwill in the Valley and reduce triggers for unrest and infiltration. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has been effectively frozen since the 2016 Uri attack. Reviving it with a counter-terrorism agenda and economic focus could provide a neutral platform for engagement.

India and Pakistan have vast untapped trade potential as estimated to be \$37 billion annually but currently less than \$3 billion due to political barriers (World Bank, 2018). Reopening trade routes, granting MFN status, and liberalizing visa regimes can foster economic interdependence, which in turn dampens incentives for conflict.

Civil society and independent media in both countries can act as catalysts for peace. Student, artist, journalist, and academic exchanges can build empathy and challenge hostile narratives. Strengthening informal diplomacy networks like the Neemrana Dialogue or Amanki Asha can help sustain engagement during official deadlocks. Promoting balanced journalism and regulating inflammatory content is critical to preventing escalatory public sentiment.

While India officially rejects third-party mediation, creative facilitation models like backchannel diplomacy supported by neutral powers can offer breakthroughs. The U.S., China, and Gulf States can exert pressure and incentives on Pakistan to dismantle its terror infrastructure. UN bodies and FATF can continue applying normative and financial pressure for counter-terrorism reforms. Track 1.5 diplomacy, semi-official talks involving retired officials and diplomats can build the groundwork for official agreements.

Conclusion

The India-Pakistan relationship remains one of the most enduring and dangerous rivalries in modern geopolitics. At the heart of this conflict lies a security dilemma compounded by cross-border terrorism, contested narratives, and historical grievances. The recurring cycles of violence punctuated by military confrontations, diplomatic breakdowns, and terrorist attacks have entrenched mistrust, hardened public opinion, and hindered sustainable peace.

This article has examined the evolution of cross-border terrorism, its institutional underpinnings, and its role in shaping the security calculus of both countries. Pakistan's strategic use of non-state actors has historically provided it a low-cost tool of asymmetric warfare, while India's responses have transitioned from strategic restraint to limited offensive retaliation, exemplified by the 2016 surgical strikes and 2019 Balakot airstrikes.

The international dimensions of the conflict including the involvement of major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia highlight the broader geopolitical implications of South Asia's instability. Meanwhile, institutions like the FATF, UN, and Track II diplomacy forums have offered both pressure and opportunity for peacebuilding. Despite several policy responses and bilateral initiatives from CBMs and military-to-military communication to people-to-people contacts the gains have often been reversed by spoilers, political opportunism, and a lack of institutional continuity. The revocation of Article 370, Pakistan's continued use of plausible deniability, and publicized acts of terrorism have further widened the chasm. Yet, pathways to peace remain viable such as clarifying nuclear and military doctrines to enhance deterrence stability. Establishing credible counter-terrorism cooperation mechanisms. Reviving economic integration and regionalism via SAARC. Reframing the Kashmir dispute through gradualism and inclusive dialogue. Leveraging civil society and media to humanize the conflict. Using third-party facilitation discreetly when direct talks stall. Crucially, political will and leadership vision are indispensable. A paradigm shift from zero-sum nationalism to cooperative security is needed to escape the trap of perpetual hostility. As history has shown, even the most intractable conflicts can be resolved through dialogue, empathy, and sustained engagement. While the road ahead is fraught with challenges, the costs of inaction in terms of human lives, economic potential, and regional security far outweigh the difficulties of diplomacy. For South Asia to move forward, both India and Pakistan must transcend their past, address their security concerns with sincerity, and seize every opportunity for peace.

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